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EDITOR'S LETTER

Owning the Forefront

Jim Hiller, owner of Hiller's Markets in Michigan, captured the feeling of many retailers when he said: "Having a gluten-free line is intrinsic to grocery operators who want to see themselves as specialty retailers."

When two customers with celiac disease walked into his Ann Arbor store explaining why they needed gluten-free items, Hiller didn't stop at adding one or two products to his mix. He asked the shoppers for a list of things they wanted; did research on celiac disease at the Mayo Clinic and attended local meetings of celiac sufferers to learn more—all of which led to his current selection of 5,000 items that has made him the go-to source for gluten-free in the Midwest. Hiller recognized customers turn to specialty retailers for more than just the products on shelves. Customers want retailers to understand—and take seriously—their health and wellness needs and concerns.

This is particularly true in an unfamiliar category, like gluten-free was nine years ago when Hiller was first building his selection. But it is also true today as new consumers come into the market needing information on how to cook or bake with gluten-free products and ingredients. All gluten-free shoppers want to see more products and find more examples in the prepared foods section so they don't feel that their new lifestyle means giving up favorite foods. They also want to meet the manufacturers to learn about their facilities and production methods. All of this information and support provides a level of customer service and gratitude among customers who want to feel cared for—one that pays off for merchants who provide it.

Granted, today large-scale operators such as Whole Foods and, most recently, Fresh & Easy Neighborhood Markets have made gluten-free items more of a priority, but that doesn't mean that specialty should cede that ground. Retailers have to hold that line of differentiation as being the forward thinkers—the place customers go when they need elusive or specialized products.

A similar opportunity is emerging with the increasing interest in biodynamic foods. Sometimes dismissed as counter-culture mysticism (or as one biodynamic importer, Lee Greene of The Scrumptious Pantry, entertainingly puts it, "some weird sect dancing in the nude at full moon,") there's a growing swell of interest in foods grown biodynamically

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among consumers who view it as organic 2.0 and are seeking out foods grown this way as a healthier, more sustainable choice. But very few consumers—or even retailers—truly understand what this method of agriculture actually is. You can turn to our article *Biodynamics 101* on page 38 for an overview of the history and production methods of biodynamic farming as well as a look at some of the products carrying this label. They can help your selection stand out, and help position you at the forefront as this health and lifestyle movement gains traction. |SFM|



By Denise Purcell

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Biodynamics 101

BY JULIE BESONEN

A growing number of wines, specialty foods and even cosmetics are showing up on store shelves with the label 'biodynamic' or touting biodynamic ingredients. But what does this mean exactly?

Biodynamic® farming is sometimes referred to as being “super” organic and sustainable. Its approach is to treat each farm as its own ecosystem, using holistic remedies for soil, integrating livestock and creating a biologically diverse habitat. The core beliefs of the method also depend upon seasonal cycles and cosmic rhythms. Its practices, however—which range from planting according to lunar cycles to incorporating alternative methods into the farming—have been considered by some to be too eccentric for the serious business of agriculture. (The one standard practice that gets the most attention involves filling the horn from a cow with fresh dung, burying it in the fall and digging it up in the spring. The organic material that remains in the horn is used as a soil treatment.)

Biodynamic farming is growing as this type of production finds traction in the U.S. and abroad and garners more attention from manufacturers for the rich flavors many believe the method of agriculture produces. It was the flavor profile of the

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biodynamic Ceylon cinnamon from Rainforest Spices in Costa Rica that convinced Ben and Pete Van Leeuwen to buy it to use as the key ingredient in their new Ceylon Cinnamon ice cream. Their two-year-old company, Van Leeuwen Artisan Ice Cream, in Brooklyn, N.Y., has five ice cream trucks and one shop. "It truly was different from the seven or eight other cinnamons we tried," says Pete. "The flavor jumps out at you, like natural FireBalls or Red Hots."

Consumers are also beginning to embrace biodynamic agriculture because they care about food quality and the environment and believe its standards to be beyond traditional organic and sustainability farming. Gena Nonini, owner of the biodynamic 100-acre Marian Farms in Fresno, Calif., chair of the Demeter Biodynamic Trade Association (DBTA) and an early biodynamic pioneer, thinks more consumers are also crossing over to the biodynamic category because of health concerns, including parents who are worried about what their children are eating. "And if things didn't taste good, people wouldn't pay the money," she notes.

According to the U.S. Demeter Association (the biodynamic certifying body), there are 100 certified biodynamic farms and 48 more in transition in the U.S. with the highest percentage being California wineries. "Our membership has quadrupled these past four or five years," says Elizabeth Candelario, Demeter's marketing director. Beyond wine, biodynamic meats, eggs, produce, cheese, pasta, dairy, nuts and even distilled spirits and beer are being made everywhere, from California to Tennessee to New York.

Here we take a look at the principles and history of this method, as well as its growth in the U.S.

The Basics of Biodynamic Farming

According to the Demeter Association, the Demeter Biodynamic Trade Association and Demeter International, biodynamic farming is similar to certified-organic farming as it is free of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers. In order to qualify for Demeter Biodynamic® status (the words Demeter and biodynamic are registered) a farm must first meet the same three-year transition requirement that the National Organic Program (NOP) certified-organic farming requires. Here are other key points:

1. *Each farm is its own ecosystem.* The farm depends on a minimum of nutrients imported from outside the farm and, ideally, generates its own fertility through cover-cropping and the use of manure from animals that live on the farm. Nonini adds that integrating animals

into the farm is also important to create a diversified horticultural environment. In addition to livestock—cows, horses or pigs—earthworms working underground play an important part in the life of the soil as do bees above ground with pollination.

"I say that the farm is a symphony, the farmer is the conductor and the universe provides the sheet music. It's up to the farmer to get that music to play harmoniously."

2. *Farmers must be attuned to seasonal and cosmic rhythms and cycles.* For farmers to pursue biodynamic certification, Demeter International explains, "[You must have an] active interest in the laws of nature and the will to work with them creatively in your daily activities. It is also important that you are open to a holistic view of the natural world, which goes beyond the knowledge gained purely from natural science."

The DBTA notes that organic farming focuses in terms of substances that are or are not added to the crops, but biodynamic farmers think beyond that in terms of forces and processes. This belief can manifest itself on the farm, for example, by noting the effects of the new and full moons on planting seeds and plant growth. As Nonini explains, "Think about the high and low tides. What causes that? The moon has a big impact on weather activities here on earth. You can't see the forces coming from the moon but you can see the results. You can't see gravity, but you can see the effects. Biodynamics takes into consideration natural forces and processes that we can't see and don't have the instruments to measure today, but are there."

3. *Farmers must use all nine of the specially created biodynamic preparations to help keep the farm in balance.* While other types of farming may include a whole-farm approach or have a strong commitment to sustainability, a key distinction for being biodynamic is that farmers must use a series of preparations to homeopathically treat compost, soil and plants. These include Horn Manure (this is where they bury a cow horn filled with fresh dung in the fall and dig it up in the spring), Horn Silica (same thing as horn manure but it is buried in the spring and dug up in the fall to take advantage of the seasonal solar influences), Yarrow, Chamomile, Stinging Nettles, Oak Bark, Dandelion Flowers, Valerian and Horsetail. These formulations are used in very small amounts. The horn manure, for example, is mixed with water and a quarter cup of it is sprayed over an acre of soil.

The History of Biodynamics

In the early 20th century European farmers, concerned about the deterioration of their crops and livestock health caused by factory farming, sought help from the famous Austrian cultural philosopher Rudolf Steiner. In 1924 he held a series of lectures on the farm as a living organism, questioning the long-term benefits of chemical

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pesticides and synthetic fertilizers. To reduce dependence on outside materials, he encouraged incorporating livestock, composting, perennial plants, flowers and trees for fertility and pest control. His adherents coined the term "biodynamic."

To renew the soil, Steiner devised the nine alchemical preparations (mentioned on p. 39), which were made from herbs, mineral substances and animal manures and guided by cyclical rhythms of nature and the phases of the moon. The biodynamic association Demeter (named for the Greek god of agriculture) was formed in 1928 to focus on this work with proponents noting that the practices were rooted in the *Old Farmer's Almanac*, Native American land management and even at Stonehenge, which some historians believe was an agricultural yardstick for planting and harvesting.

Since Demeter International was founded, it has grown to represent around 4,200 Demeter producers in 43 countries.

Wine Opens the Door

The wine industry is where many of us first experienced biodynamics. Jeff Cox, the "wine guy" at PCC Natural Market in Seattle, Wash., carries 15-20 biodynamic wines and is seeing more enter the market. "A lot of people pooh-pooh it because it sounds metaphysical, talking about the phases of the moon," he says, "but there are a lot of things in this world you can't quantify. The depth of flavor and character in the bottle—you can't attain that through conventional agriculture." For customers who can afford wines in the \$15 to \$20 range, he believes, "It's a no-brainer once they taste it."

Alsace, France, is a region that has been at the forefront of the movement. Emmanuelle Kreydenweiss, the winemaker for Domaine

Marc Kreydenweiss in Andlau, France, has farmed biodynamically since 1989. "We noticed there was more acidity, complexity and finesse, freshness and purity in the wines," she says. "The wines have something more, which you cannot precisely tell but you can feel, something like energy, authenticity."

At first Kreydenweiss' customers were a bit suspicious of biodynamics, she explains. "But really our customers did not react badly. They appreciated the fact we could offer them healthy wines and they could taste the quality."

Alain Moueix is the estate manager at Château Fonroque, a Saint-Emilion winery that's leading the way in Bordeaux. "When I started in 2004 nobody cared, but today more people are showing interest, everybody is talking about the environment. You don't have to be extreme to be biodynamic," he states, downplaying the eccentric aspects of Steiner's theories. "It is pragmatic to learn to live with nature. We won't control it, ever."

Fresh and Packaged Foods

In the late 1980s, when Steffen Schneider, the general manager of the 400-acre Hawthorne Valley Farm in Ghent, N.Y., told customers the farm was biodynamic he was met with blank stares. "Biodynamic is the frontier, the new niche for people who want to be able to distinguish from organic, which is becoming more industrial and less meaningful," says Schneider. Today, Hawthorne Valley sells dairy products up and down the East Coast, as well as sauerkraut, ginger, carrots, cheese, baked goods, pork and beef. "There's more demand than supply," he adds.

Demand started to take off three years ago for the biodynamic berries, vegetables, mushrooms, eggs and cheese produced at Bill Keener's 300-acre Sequatchie Cove Farm, 35 miles outside of Chattanooga, Tenn. "The locals thought we were nuts," says Keener, of making the transition to biodynamic. "Slowly but surely, the ones with open minds are coming by to help us and see what we're doing." Keener says his soil has steadily improved and a handful of Southeast restaurants now carry his rare-breed beef and pork. And, in 2007, Chattanooga's 27,000-square-foot, independently owned Greenlife Grocery opened, making Sequatchie Cove's meat widely available to the public.

Nationwide, Marian Farms sells dried fruit, nuts, oak-aged brandy, lemons, oranges and grapes. Estate-made vodka and rum are in the works. Nonini is also working directly with Mark Ellenbogen, a partner in Bar Agricole, a restaurant opening in San Francisco in late spring focused on local and biodynamic products. "We're supporting farmers up front," says Ellenbogen, "giving them money for what we need. It's just the quality of the products coming from these farms, whether you subscribe to the philosophy or not."

Other packaged foods where biodynamics are playing a growing role include tea. Zhenya Muzyka, CEO of Zhenya's Gypsy Tea,

(continued on p. 62)

(continued from p. 33)

STORE SNAPSHOT: RICHARD'S FOODPORIUM

When it comes to expansion, Rorer looks at "B-list" properties—those in older strip malls or standalones—to keep rents low.

Recent Trends...Customers are making healthier choices. "People are understanding that natural food stores offer a lot of solutions for special diets, gluten-free, in particular," notes Rorer.

The Future...Rorer is always looking for new opportunities. In addition to strong franchisee candidates, he is in the process of adding more brand-building components to his business such as buying equipment so he can package his own bulk items. His plan is to sell these items to other retailers, restaurants and future franchisees. **[SFM]**

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(continued from p. 35)

STORE SNAPSHOT: GREEN ACRES MARKET

ate special programs and events. For example, we have a free holiday meal tasting so people can learn about options for their holiday meals and know what to order. We have live music on the weekends, farmers' markets and a huge focus on education and classes, bringing in national speakers. This speaks to the two main focuses of our business: alternative health education and creating a shopping experience where people can find clean foods and clean produce," says Shannon.

Number of Employees...Wichita store, 32 (16 full-time, 16 part-time); Kansas City, 27 (16 full-time, 11 part-time).

Community Outreach...Green Acres hosts classes once a week with industry experts. "Because education is so integral to our store's focus, we have a whole internal marketing program and develop newsletters. We also partner with our vendors to create a tabloid we insert in papers that has education and information," says Shannon. "I did a huge women's health series on adrenal fatigue, bioidentical hormones and energy balance, partnering with four other professionals around town. We built a whole girlfriend getaway around it," she adds. "Longevity will be a big theme for next year." The stores also host a tasting fair, an anniversary celebration, a dog wash to benefit local animal charities and other events.

Future Plans..."We'd like to have a nice small chain of stores that we keep this size and with this model. We want to go into medium-sized markets predominantly in the Midwest and serve a category that larger stores can't," explains Shannon. **[SFM]**

Meghann Foye is a freelance writer specializing in food and travel.

(continued from p. 40)

NATURAL SELECTIONS

While other types of farming may include a whole-farm approach or have a strong commitment to sustainability, a key distinction for being biodynamic is that farmers must use a series of preparations to homeopathically treat compost, soil and plants.

based in Ojai, Calif., is passionate when talking about the tea leaves, flowers and spices she's sourcing from biodynamic farms around the world. When blending the leaves with essential oils, she noticed, "the flavor came to life far more than with organic." She holds blind tastings to prove it to customers, who also like hearing "it's the least carbon footprint of any method in the world."

In just four years, another biodynamic tea producer, Ineeka Tea, has gone from selling in zero stores to being sold in 3,000 retail locations nationwide. The Chicago-based company recently launched Himalayan Green Tea Bier made with biodynamic green tea. Sarah Trench, a spokesperson for Ineeka, says about biodynamics, "It's a near and dear philosophy, not something we broadcast as a marketing tool. We only recently started putting the Demeter logo on our tea tins because there was more recognition."

The Challenges

In the expansion of biodynamics, the economics of farming plays a big role, says Nonini. There are still only a relatively small number of producers who are doing it and to convert to biodynamics takes a commitment of time and money. "In the organic realm, there is a huge spectrum of practices," she notes. In biodynamics, "you either are or you are not biodynamic." Because of the small number of growers, there is potential for a supply bottleneck and, Nonini adds, "we don't have a lot of variety yet. We are doing our due diligence to encourage people, but biodynamics is a paradigm shift. It isn't something you can just pick up."

Across the board, other producers agree, saying biodynamic farming is more labor intensive, yields are generally smaller and they were not doing it for attention or the money. And there is still a lot of consumer education needed. "Unfortunately, it's often considered some weird sect dancing in the nude at full moon," says Lee Greene, who imports biodynamic Volterra pasta and extra virgin olive oil from Tuscany for her Chicago-based company, The Scrumptious Pantry. "In reality all it is about is empowering nature to make its own choices, for the sake of more authentic taste." **[SFM]**

Julie Besonen is the food editor at Paper magazine, writes a weekly restaurant column for nycgo.com and has contributed to the New York Times and the New York Daily News.